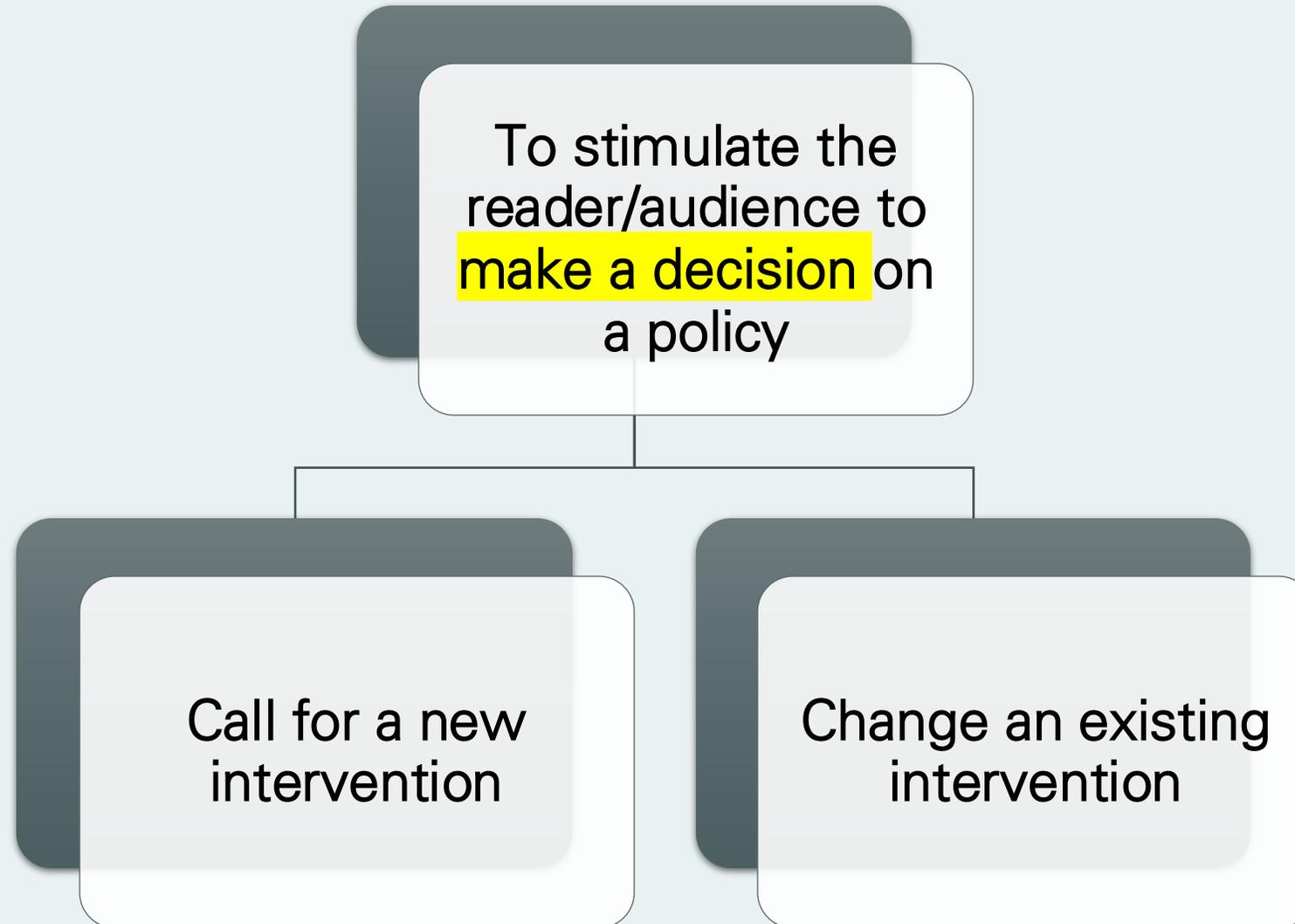# POLICY WRITING SEMINAR: STRATEGY AND STYLE

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Co-Sponsors:
Center for Russian, East European & Eurasian Studies
European Studies Center
University Center for International Studies

Objectives of Policy Writing

To stimulate the reader/audience to ==make a decision== on a policy

Call for a new intervention

Change an existing intervention

How do we accomplish that?

By communicating a summary of a complex problem and/or process succinctly

By providing evidence-based description: what is happening & why is it happening

By capturing viable alternatives: how things might change

And, by understanding our audience

Policymakers and practitioners are:

1. responsible for and/or interested in formulating or influencing policy (*they have a stake*)

2. some are specialists, but most are generalists

3. all are important people with limited time and attention span

4. they need your information to make a decision

Strasbourg, April 2022 - People taking part in the 7th Plenary session of the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFE).

Policy Brief

is a concise summary of information on a policy issue that can help readers understand and make decisions about.

provides objective summaries of information and research, outlines facts and evidence for possible policy options.

depends on evidence produced by research but does not emphasize research process.

is solution oriented. It offers a summary of a timely and relevant problem/issue and chase an urgent solution. It is prescriptive not descriptive.

Parts of a Policy Brief

Title and Executive summary
- External Facing First Page
- Effective Summary

Body/Context
- Problem/Issue Definition
- Policy Alternatives

Recommendation(s)
- Recommended Course of Action and Restatement of Reasons

Resources
- End Notes, Works Consulted
- Author Information

Title

- Punchy

- Informative

- Immediately communicates content and/or subject in a memorable way

	Title	Comments
	Food security in protracted crises: What can be done?	Posing a question in the title is a good way to lure someone into reading the text.
	HIV, food security and nutrition	A simple title that brings together the three main subjects discussed in the policy brief.
	Farmer field schools on land and water management: An extension approach that works	The main title describes the content of the paper. The subtitle gives more explanations and invites the reader to find out why the approach works.
	Rising food prices – A global crisis: Action needed now to avoid poverty and hunger	The main title is only six words. The subtitle reinforces the urgency of the issue.

Executive Summary

- Heart and soul of any policy document. It is written last.

- Comprehensive yet succinct summary of the brief: problem, core assessment and the recommended course of action.

- Grab the readers' attention for a full read- gives away the punchline.

The **executive summary** in a **policy brief** is your chance to quickly hook the reader and summarize the most important points. Think of it as the "elevator pitch" for the brief— short, sharp, and focused on **what the issue is**, **why it matters**, and **what needs to be done**. To do it effectively:

1. Problem Statement: Start with 1–2 sentences summarizing the core issue or challenge. Be precise and policy-relevant.

> ➢ *Despite rising educational spending, literacy rates among rural children remain 30% below the national average.*

2. Why It Matters / Urgency: Explain the significance—economic, social, political, or ethical. Why should policymakers care?

> ➢ *This gap hinders economic development and deepens cycles of poverty in marginalized regions*

3. Briefly summarize major data points or analysis—just the most compelling evidence, no more than 1–2 sentences.

> ➢ *Studies show early interventions improve reading scores by up to 40% within a year.*

4. Policy Recommendations: List your main recommendations, ideally in bullet or sentence form (avoid full detail—save that for later).

> ➢ **This brief recommends:** Increasing targeted funding for rural schools; Incentivizing skilled teachers to work in remote areas; Launching a national reading support program

Body/Context

Problem/Issue Definition

- Context, background
- Problem identification to communicate the importance of the problem to convince the audience of the necessity of policy action

Policy Alternatives

- Discusses potential alternatives to current state of policy at hand
- It is objective and fact-based

NEXT: *ENOUGH* BACKGROUND

Provide Sufficient Background on the Issue

➤ Don't assume your audience will already have all the background information on this issue.

➤ Summarize any relevant background that will put the issue into context and ensure your reader quickly has a grasp of the history and full scope of the issue.

➤ You can also use your appendices and sources section to provide more background information so you don't disrupt the flow of the main text.

Include Data and Statistics to Support your Argument

➤ Backing up your argument with statistics is a non-negotiable for a policy briefing.

➤ Choose stats that pack a punch and consider presenting them in a visual way that stands out.

➤ Don't bog down your brief with too many numbers, though. Select the statistics that most support your recommendations and have the greatest impact.

SIDEBAR NOTE: Evidence

It is important to include references from publications with a wide sphere of influence, e.g., OECD, UN, WHO, EU Commission, The New York Times, *etc.* The use of such references informs the reader that the topic is **current and in the public purview**.

Using current references defines the challenge and facilitates an understanding of the extent of the challenge.

Using statistics from respected published sources that are current, reputable, and peer reviewed is an effective way to "bring home the point." Frequently used data highlight that many people are affected or potentially affected by these policies, or there lack of, or their associated costs.

NEXT: ALTERNATIVE COURSES OF ACTION

This section moves from the discussion of the current policies in place, to why it is necessary to consider different alternatives.

A short cut for alternatives is to look elsewhere:

When creating a 'state' policy brief, Joshua Habursky, head of government relations at the Premium Cigar Association, recommends drawing comparisons and contrasts with other states. "If your brief is to California policymakers, describe what they did in Nevada," he says. "If California and New York are originating it, it's going to come to the other 48 states in some way, shape, or form."

Alternative courses of action need to be presented in a balanced and defensible way supported by evidence.

- One of the key approaches is to let the reader know what could happen if something does not change.
- Alternatives section must be presented without inflammatory language. Active voice and bullet points are useful.

Recommendation(s)

Recommended Course(s) of Action

- Details the **specific course(s) of actio**n recommended by the author
- Draws the link between the problem, discussion of alternatives towards solutions
- Different than the previous section on alternatives, this section recommends one or more courses for the audience (policymakers and practitioners) should take and addresses their implementation (what will it take for that action to be realized?)
- Uses a persuasive language but remains all arguments are rooted firmly and clearly in evidence produced by the research.

Policy Brief

Division of Childcare and Housework among Men and Women during COVID-19 lockdowns[1]

Enhancing Access to and Sharing of Data in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

6 February 2025

What can policymakers do to implement the OECD Recommendation on EASD in the age of AI?

- Empower and pro-actively engage all relevant stakeholders alongside broader efforts to increase the trustworthiness of the data ecosystem.
- Adopt a strategic whole-of-government approach to ensure that data access and sharing arrangements effectively and efficiently meet specific societal, policy, and legal objectives that are in the public interest.
- Maximise the benefits of data access and sharing, while protecting individuals' and organisations' rights and taking into account other legitimate interests and objectives.
- Encourage market-based approaches by fostering competitive markets for data and promoting, where appropriate, self- or co-regulation mechanisms.
- Promote conditions for the development and adoption of sustainable business models and markets for data access and sharing.
- Promote appropriate incentive mechanisms.
- Further improve conditions for cross-border data access and sharing with trust.
- Foster the findability, accessibility, interoperability, and reusability of data ("FAIR data") across organisations, including within and across the public and private sectors.
- Enhance the capacity of all stakeholders to use data more effectively and responsibly.

Policy recommendations

From this review, a number of policy recommendations can be made.

- Firstly, by quantifying the very high amount of workload that households with children are forced to handle, this review highlights the need to avoid closing childcare institutions and schools as long as a pandemic situation allows.

- Secondly, the review has shown that women's continued role as the main contributor to childcare and housework – even in such extreme circumstances – is often unrelated to their employment responsibilities. This indicates a strong need to combat gender stereotypes and promote the greater involvement of men in childcare and housework.

- Thirdly, a careful re-consideration of employers' practices is needed, that takes the multifaceted nature of telework into account. This pandemic has shown that working from home can be both a blessing and a curse – especially for women with children who tend to use remote work as a way to balance extreme workloads. The possible negative consequences of working from home should be mitigated by employers: (i) offering to combine telework options with flexible working arrangements such as flexitime; and (ii) removing discriminatory workplace practices that penalise teleworking colleagues. Measures should also to encourage more men to take up telework options and thus to strengthen their paternal role – a positive change that the crisis has shown us to be possible.

Writing the **recommendations** section in a **policy brief** is crucial—it's where you distill your research and analysis into clear, actionable advice for decision-makers. To do it effectively:
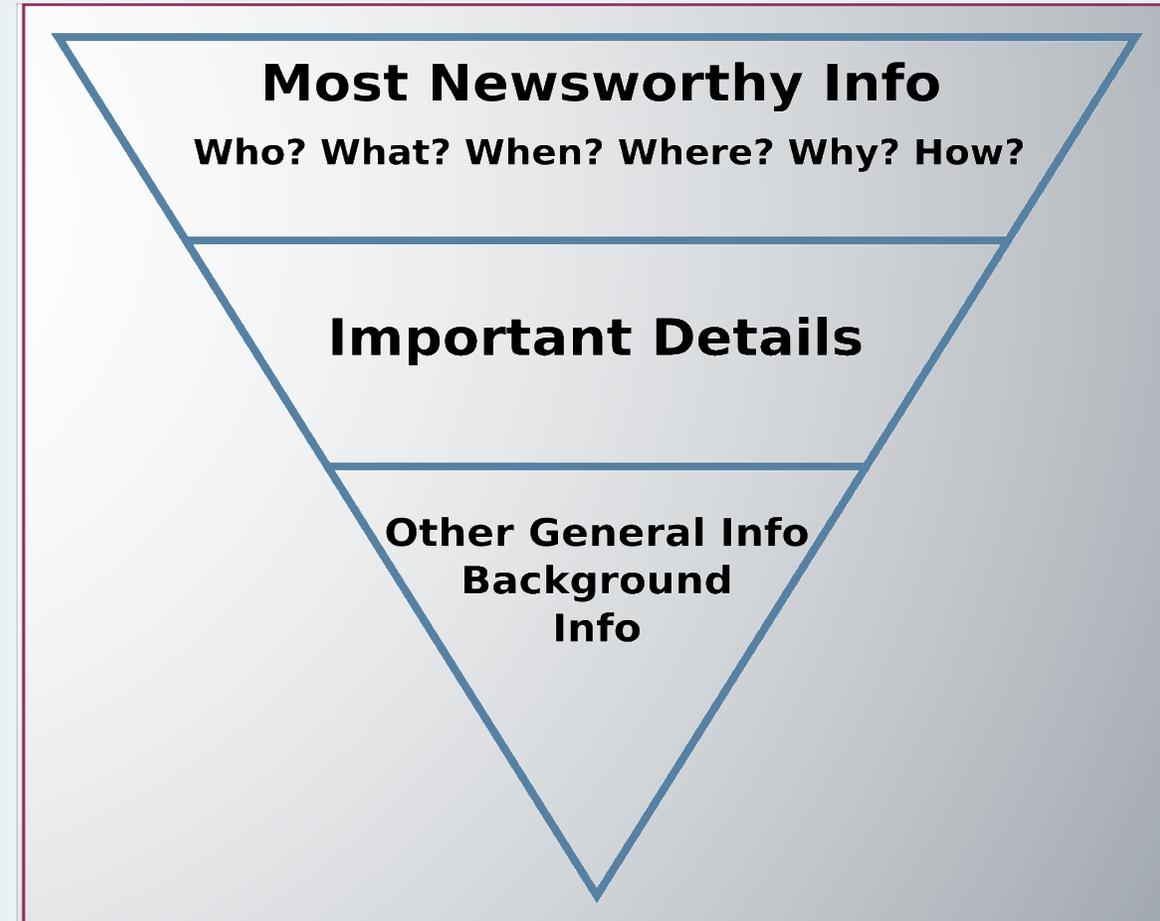
1. <mark>Be Clear and Direct:</mark> Use concise, assertive language. Avoid jargon. Policymakers are often busy and need to understand recommendations at a glance.
    - *Increase funding for early childhood education programs in rural areas by 25% over the next fiscal year.*
2. <mark>Be Actionable:</mark> Each recommendation should be specific enough to implement. Avoid vague phrases like "improve" or "enhance" without stating how.
    - *Mandate mental health screenings in public schools annually, with funding allocated for trained staff.*
3. <mark>Prioritize Recommendations:</mark> List them in order of importance or feasibility. You can group them under short subheadings like: Immediate Actions; Medium-Term Reforms; Long-Term Strategies
4. <mark>Align with the Problem Statement:</mark> Every recommendation should clearly address the core problem or evidence discussed earlier in the brief.
5. <mark>Keep it Short (but Substantive):</mark> Usually 2–5 recommendations. Use bullet points or numbered lists for easy reading.
6. <mark>Use Evidence Strategically:</mark> Briefly refer to supporting evidence (from earlier in the brief or elsewhere), but don't overload this section with data.
    - *Implement universal pre-K programs. Studies show a $7 return for every $1 invested in early childhood education*
7. <mark>Frame Recommendations Politically/Institutionally Realistically:</mark> Tailor them to your audience. Consider: their level of authority; Budget constraints; Political climate

Style: Inverted Pyramid or BLUFF

BLUFF:

Bottom **L**ine **U**p **F**ront **F**irst

- State the most important take-away first

- Save no suspense or surprise for later in the brief

- Adopt to executive summary and every paragraph of the policy brief

Most Newsworthy Info
Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

Important Details

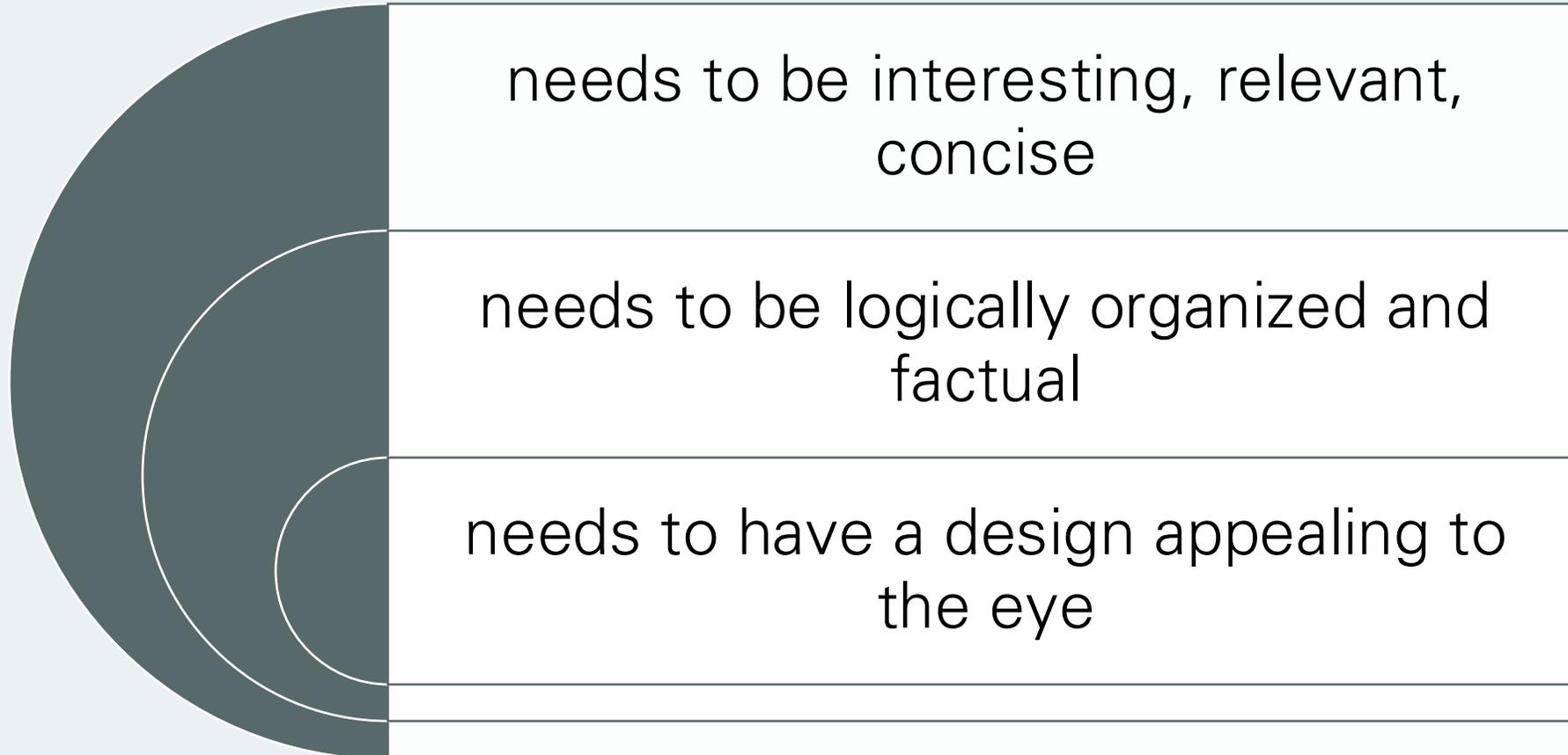**Other General Info
Background
Info**

Writing Voice

- **Accessibility is key.**
  - Short sentences and paragraphs (*BLUFF*)
  - Jargon, cliché, dramatic embellishment, hyperbole free
  - Minimal use of adjectives and adverbs

- **Analytical instead of descriptive.**
  - Neutral voice- minimal use of adjectives and adverbs
  - Active voice vs passive voice; no personal pronouns
  - Evidence and fact based, no room for opinions, feelings or beliefs

When in doubt, *simplify and shorten*

- Make sure you structure your policy brief in a **logical manner**. Do not force the reader to work to understand the logical flow.
  - ✓ **Keep the paragraphs short** and restricted to a **single idea**. Consider putting this idea into a single phrase or sentence and printing it in boldface at the beginning of the paragraph.
  - ✓ **Use more headings** and subheadings than you would do normally.
  - ✓ Remove all jargon.
  - ✓ Re-read each paragraph and ask yourself **"so what?"** If it is not obvious what the paragraph is trying to say, rewrite it or delete it.
  - ✓ Policy briefs are high-profile publications, and they go to important people. It is important to get them right.

To have its intended effect, your brief must be read. To be read, your brief

| needs to be interesting, relevant, concise |
| needs to be logically organized and factual |
| needs to have a design appealing to the eye |

Template

I. Executive Summary (to be written last)

II. **Policy Problem Identification** (Audience, stakeholders and information environment set-up (context/background)

III. Policy Alternatives (building up the case for *change)*

IV. Recommendation(s)

V. Design elements (tables, graphics, sidebars..etc.), works consulted